

Panel Discussion – Early Targeted Interventions

EDUCATION INTERIM COMMITTEE NAME
PAD MCCracken – JUNE 2026

CONTEXT – THE INNOVATION AND EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION WORKING GROUP

The [2025-2026 School Funding Interim Commission](#) was tasked with not only examining Montana's school funding formula, but first with examining Montana's educational system as a whole and *develop[ing] recommendations, objectives, and an implementation plan... to improve the basic system of free, quality, public elementary and secondary schools*. This work was often referred to as "Phase I" of the Commission's work but was formally the Innovation and Excellence in Education Working Group or IEEWG. The Commission contracted with the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) to facilitate this aspect of the Commission's work, and Janice Case and Matthew Bachand from NCEE presented a [summary](#) of the [IEEWG's final report](#) to the Education Interim Committee on March 16, 2026, highlighting several recommendations for the committee to consider exploring. Several of those recommendations related to early learning, and today's panel discussion will focus on three:

1. Establish a single statewide "evaluation methodology" for program eligibility;
2. Provide upfront funding to launch early targeted intervention programs; and
3. Ensure school districts have a pathway to partner with high-quality community-based early learning providers

EARLY TARGETED INTERVENTION PROGRAMS

In 2023, the Legislature established Early Literacy Targeted Intervention Programs ([HB 352; Barker](#)) which were expanded to include early numeracy in 2025 ([HB 338; Romano](#)) and are now known simply as Early Targeted Interventions. The interventions are aimed at providing extra support for students identified as being at risk of not meeting 3rd grade proficiency benchmarks and can take three forms:

- Classroom-based for 4-year-olds
- Home-based for children from age 4 through completion of 2nd grade
- Jump Start, a summer program that can precede kindergarten through 3rd grade

All programs are optional for school districts to implement and are voluntary for parents.

PROGRAM ELIGIBILITY

Eligibility for all programs is through an "evaluation methodology" selected by the Board of Public Education. From [20-7-1802, MCA](#):

(3) "Evaluation methodology" means a research-based methodology, instrument, or assessment selected by the board of public education to determine, based on a child's age or grade level, whether the child is above, at, or below a developmental trajectory leading to reading or math proficiency on completion of 3rd grade.

The Board's administrative rules for both literacy¹ and numeracy² identify criteria that the evaluation methodology must meet at various age/grade levels, explain how the board will maintain and update lists³ of approved screening tools, and allow districts to select from the lists or use other screening tools if they meet the criteria. The [September 2025 Program report](#) lists 13 different screening tools employed by districts around the state. While this provides flexibility it also means less consistency in terms of eligibility and the inability to compare program effectiveness (until grade 3 when statewide assessments begin).

PROGRAM FUNDING

This brief description will not include the home-based program which receives a fixed appropriation. Both the classroom-based program and the jump start program rely on ANB funding, which always lags a year (students included in enrollment counts in year 1 do not generate ANB funding until year 2). Students in a classroom-based program meeting instructional hour requirements generate ANB funding in the same manner as students in grades K-12. Students in a jump start program are counted for an additional .25 enrollment which generates roughly an additional .25 ANB. When Montana expanded kindergarten from half-day to full-day, a mechanism existed that allowed funding to flow in the first year, by increasing a district's budget limit ANB. Start-up funding could also be provided through a grant program or other means.

IMPACTS ON COMMUNITY-BASED PROVIDERS

A concern often raised when states create or expand publicly funded early education programs through public schools is that existing community-based early learning providers are negatively impacted, possibly destabilizing the often-fragile early childhood ecosystem. Many states utilize a mixed-delivery model for preschool and early learning which allows public funding to flow to community-based providers that meet quality standards. While it seems as though Montana school districts *could* partner with community-based providers to expand slots in early targeted intervention programs, the pathway to do so could be more clearly delineated. [House Bill No. 654](#) (Edwards, 2025) proposed one way of doing this (and provided start-up funding) but was tabled in committee.

PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

Each September, OPI provides an [Early Targeted Interventions Report](#) to the Education Interim Committee and the Education Interim Budget Committee. The report contains a wealth of information about the three intervention programs, including participation numbers by school district. Statewide, in the 24-25 school year:

- 1,204 students participated in the Jumpstart program
- 2,025 students participated in the Classroom-based program
- 129 students participated in the Home-based program

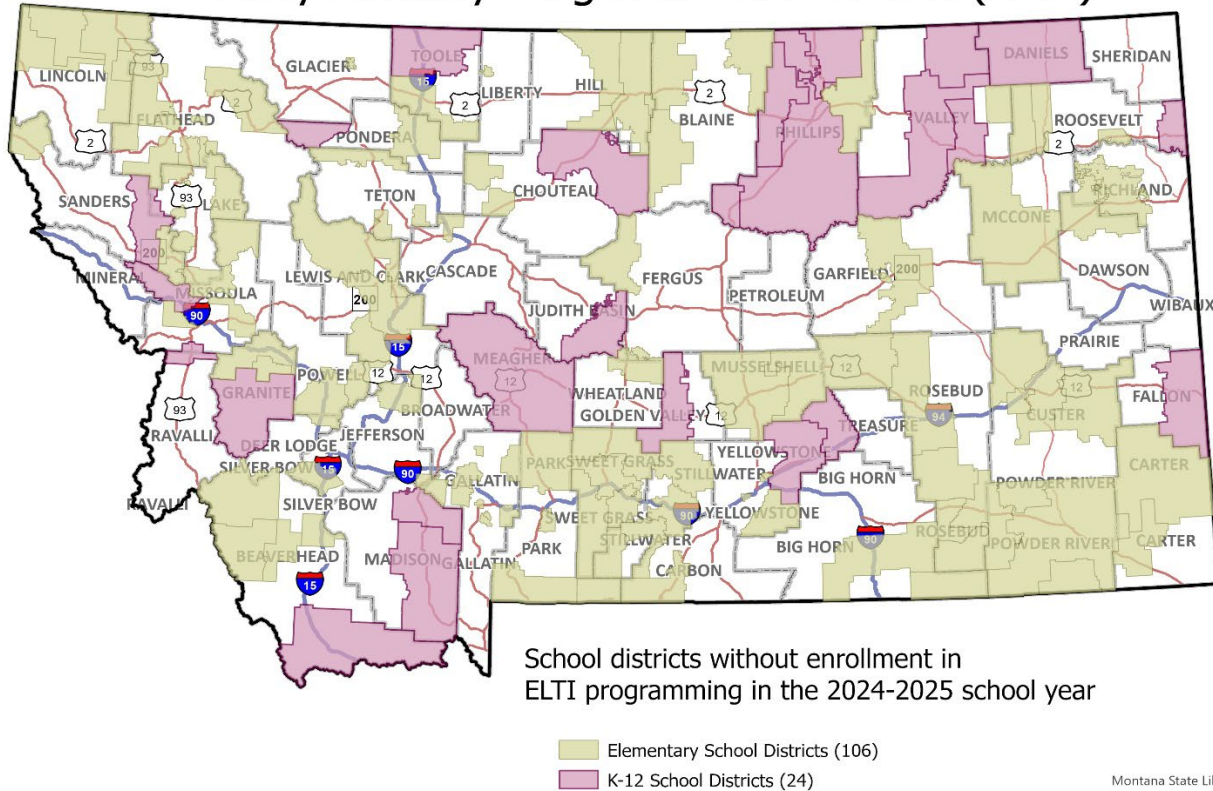
¹ [10.54.901 EVALUATION METHODOLOGY FOR EARLY LITERACY TARGETED INTERVENTIONS](#)

² [10.54.903 EVALUATION METHODOLOGY FOR EARLY NUMERACY TARGETED INTERVENTIONS](#)

³ [BPE Early Literacy and Numeracy webpage](#)

The map below highlights those school districts that did not offer any Early Literacy Targeted Intervention program in the 2024-2025 school year. Note that with the addition of a focus on numeracy, the program is now called Early Targeted Interventions. Map produced by LSD data analyst Dan Kayser with data from the [September 2025 OPI report](#).

Early Literacy Targeted Intervention (ELTI)



PANELISTS AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following individuals will be participating in a panel discussion on early targeted interventions:

- Dr. Julie Murgel, Chief Program Officer; and Christy Mock-Stutz, Assistant Chief Program Officer, OPI (via Zoom)
- Doug Rossberg, Title I Instructional Coach, Missoula County Public Schools, and Member, Early Literacy and Numeracy Advisory Council
- McCall Flynn, Executive Director, BPE
- Caitlin Jensen, Executive Director, ZeroToFive Montana
- Dr. Allison Wilson, Associate Professor and Director of the Institute for Early Childhood Education, UM
- Mike Waterman, Director, Business and Operations, Bozeman Public Schools

The panelists were asked to address the following as part of the panel discussion:

- What are the pros and cons and other considerations of moving to a single statewide evaluation methodology for early targeted intervention eligibility? Would it be possible and/or desirable to have an assessment that also served as a kindergarten entry assessment and/or K-2 assessments for all students?
- What do you see as barriers to districts implementing or expanding early targeted intervention programs?
- How can a district partner with a community-based providers to expand slots in early targeted intervention programs? Would legislation providing a clearly sanctioned partnership pathway help?
- What suggestions do you have for improving early targeted intervention programs that haven't already come up?